

Grappling with the Gaps

Toward a Research Agenda to Meet the
Educational Needs of Children and Youth in Foster Care



Prepared by The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning
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The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning is made up of education professionals, scholars and public policy experts who care deeply about improving the schooling of California's children. The Center was founded in 1995 as a public, nonprofit organization with the purpose of strengthening the capacity of California's teachers for delivering rigorous, well-rounded curriculum and ensuring the continuing intellectual, ethical and social development of all children.

The Ready to Succeed Initiative is a Stuart Foundation effort to improve educational outcomes for children and youth in the foster care system by helping public education and child welfare systems work together more closely and effectively at the local and state levels.

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Introduction

Some of the nation's leading scholars and philanthropic organizations selected a dozen foster care experts to discuss what we know — and don't know — about improving educational outcomes for children and youth in foster care. These experts represent a wide range of experience and perspective including that of an urban county school superintendent, a juvenile court judge, an attorney, a pediatric mental health clinician, a social service director, and several university-based researchers.

Their viewpoints are summarized in *Grappling with the Gaps*, a report prepared by WestEd and commissioned by Ready to Succeed, a multi-year California-based initiative to improve

- 1) school readiness,
- 2) school success, and
- 3) data sharing across education, child welfare, mental health, and judicial systems.

Ready to Succeed is a bold plan to close the educational achievement gap for children and youth in foster care. Based upon the best research available, it designs and tests interventions at demonstration sites, assists policymakers and practitioners to carry out promising policies and practices, and addresses data collection and sharing challenges. Likewise, it is a call for more and better research to strengthen the evidence for what works.

Grappling with the Gaps is a starting place. It sets the groundwork to suggest new research priorities for improving policies and practices related to the educational outcomes of children and youth in foster care. Its sole source of information is interviews conducted during the winter of 2009 with 12 foster care experts who differ in familiarity with education, child welfare, and related policy and practice issues. Collectively they describe “research lags,” “holes,” “gaps in knowledge,” “a paucity of research on educational outcomes,” and “lack of evidence-based practices” contributing to the generally dismal educational outcomes Ready to Succeed aims to turn around. “It’s time to move beyond

plumbing the problem and on to solutions" was emblematic of the group's sentiment.

Thus, there is a sense of both urgency and possibility in *Grappling with the Gaps*. The following summarizes what this group of influential leaders said about our understanding of school readiness, school success, and data sharing, and the research needed to address the educational disadvantages that children and youth in foster care often face.

School Readiness

School readiness begins in infancy. It is during the first three to five years of life that the foundation for future development and learning is established. Research clearly documents that young children are more likely to enter school ready to learn when their early experiences and environments support physical, social, emotional, language, and cognitive development. But for young children in foster care, maltreatment, poverty, and family stress can put them at high risk for developmental delays and disabilities and limit their access to preschool. Many enter kindergarten already behind their classmates who come from stable families and economic advantages. Yet, according to these experts, basic information on foster children's access to early intervention services and preschool, both of which aim to influence young children's development and readiness to learn in school, is lacking.

Early intervention services. Even basic information about the percentage of eligible young children in foster care who receive early intervention services (e.g., Early HeadStart) is limited.¹ Nearly all of the experts said "we don't know who or how many" are assessed, referred, or receive services. They referenced a few studies reporting rates in a single jurisdiction that suggest access to early intervention services for young children in foster care is inadequate. Coupled with learnings from their professional experiences, the experts described

¹ Early intervention services include a variety of different resources and programs that provide support to families to enhance a child's development. These services are specifically tailored to meet a child's individual needs and are provided by public agencies and private organizations for children under age 3 who are found to be eligible for these services after a developmental evaluation.

transportation, legal status, residential mobility, family chaos, the complexity of assessing developmental delays in young children who lack consistent parenting, and inadequately trained foster parents as probable barriers to receiving services. Substantiation of these and other barriers is needed, they said, to ensure eligibility and access to services.

There is no research that assesses the value and feasibility of expanding eligibility and access to early intervention services for all young children in foster care. There is, however, a rift in opinion among the experts on this issue. Some asserted that all young children in foster care are harmed to some degree by the circumstances that result in an out-of-home placement and, as a result, could benefit from a continuum of support services, starting with early interventions. Others viewed this as misguided. They doubted that early intervention services as currently designed and delivered can moderate the effects of foster care and are concerned that the system's capacity is already strained serving children with an assessed delay or disability. The issue of universal early intervention services is unresolved and "very ripe for investigation."

High-quality preschool. "There is a real hole when it comes to information about preschool," explained one of the experts who studies early childhood education issues. "This is a huge, huge problem because what we see are kids not in school until age five or six and when they enter, they aren't ready to learn." As a group, the experts presumed the percentage of young children in foster care who attend high-quality preschool is low, but the evidence to support this assumption is mostly "unexamined" and "neglected." "We know this from our work but can't back it up with published research" or they drew from one source that shows only "six percent of children in foster care under age six attend Head Start."

The barriers to attending preschool also seem to warrant further study. Anecdotally, the group cited poverty, residential mobility, a limited number of slots, transportation, cost, the stigma of being in foster care, the challenge of meeting parent involvement requirements, and the lack of a mandate from the child welfare system to attend preschool as getting in the way. As one expert reflected, if the child welfare system valued preschool it would pay for both foster parenting and a high-quality preschool education.

Therapeutic preschools. As a group, the experts were unaware of published research on the numbers, locations, eligibility criteria, treatment modalities, and funding sources of therapeutic preschools. One expert, however, cited a small number of studies that examined the short- and long-term developmental and educational outcomes of young children who attended these schools.

School Success

Children and youth in foster care confront significant obstacles along their educational journey. They typically have higher rates of absenteeism, grade retention, disciplinary referrals, and behavior problems than the general K-12 population, and test below grade level on standardized measures. They are twice as likely as the general student population to leave school without a diploma and often face bleak life prospects after “aging out” of the foster care and school systems. Much has been written about childhood suffering, family disruptions, and systemic obstacles that partly explain these compromised outcomes. According to the experts, filling the information gap is critical for turning around “the perfect storm of resulting school failure” and promoting school success.

Instructional practices. As a group, the experts agreed that “we know virtually nothing about what happens in classrooms” for children and youth in foster care. They knew of no research that specifically identified effective instructional practices for this student population. Similarly, they asked, “How can we expect teachers to adjust their instruction if they aren’t even clued in that their students are foster kids?”

While a few of the experts thought educators need knowledge and skills “to teach foster children in special ways,” most reframed the issue more broadly and suggested that “any good quality instructional method for any child academically at risk would be good for a child in foster care.” They were “uncertain that foster children should be considered a homogeneous group for instruction,” since some were behind due to developmental delays or disabilities and others due to one or a combination of circumstances such as interrupted schooling, trauma, family chaos, or residential mobility. “It may not make sense to develop instructional strategies based on foster care status,” some

concluded, but rather to “grow what we know about good instruction for kids at risk of school failure.”

Teacher skills, training, and support. Research on teacher skills, training, and support associated with improving academic outcomes for children and youth in foster care appears to be nonexistent. “Schools are starved for this information and want classroom solutions,” recounted one of the experts, but “it isn’t there.” Another reflected that the evidence on effective teaching of children and youth in foster care is so thin that “we haven’t separated out what part of what we’re seeing in student performance is student effect, teacher effect, school effect, or system effect.” Since children and youth in foster care are often concentrated in underperforming schools, the experts emphasized the importance of investigating teacher effectiveness and promising instructional practices in context.

Trauma and learning. Brain science research on the effects of trauma, according to the group of experts, has the potential to eventually reach the classroom in the form of interventions and teaching tools to address associated symptoms such as learning difficulties and problematic behaviors. The information familiar to the group has not looked at trauma² and learning among children and youth in foster care and is not widely available to teachers. They viewed this gap in information and professional development as “important areas to do more work in since trauma can effect cognitive and socio-emotional functioning, and both memory and behavior relate to learning.”

However, among the experts there were differing perceptions about the extent to which children and youth in foster care experience trauma. One view is “every child in foster care is in trauma. Period. We need to work with that fact.” Another view is “these kids are vulnerable to stress and schools need to find ways to compensate.” While yet an alternative view suggests that “it may be a myth that as a general population kids in care have trauma.” These wide-ranging perceptions underscore “the real gap that we don’t know a lot” about

² Trauma typically can include physical and/or psychological components, such as a serious physical injury or shock, or an experience that is emotionally painful, distressing, or shocking that leads to lasting mental and physical effects.

who and how many children and youth in foster care have trauma symptoms that impede learning.

Interventions. Many studies exist on the effectiveness of various tutoring, mentoring, behavioral, and after-school interventions intended for a general student population at risk of poor performance and school failure. “The content, delivery and effectiveness of these interventions need to be studied across the multiple systems that interact with kids in care,” explained the experts. “We need more specialized knowledge about what works for students in foster care.” Related, there is a dearth of information about promising ways to prevent suspension, expulsion, and dropping out for middle and high school youth in foster care. “Data confirm the problem, but what’s missing is what to do about it.” Little is also known “about the source of these outcomes,” including zero tolerance school policies, the lack of strong parental advocacy, and years of educational neglect. One expert mentioned a gap in our understanding of what happens in the lives of students who experience disrupted schooling caused by disciplinary sanctions or dropping out, suspecting that for youth in foster care it can have the added consequence of destabilizing their home placements as well.

As a group, the experts further described several reasons for the limited information about effective interventions. One is the data challenge of disaggregating the relatively small and often unidentified foster care population from a larger population to assess effects. Related to this is diversity in the foster care population, making it hard to generalize about causes of problems and effects of interventions for students with multiple and differing risk factors. “We don’t even know why their performance is so low. Is it attendance, instability in their home placement, school changes, or cognitive impairments and developmental delays?” Without better information, they said, “we can’t know much about the right interventions.”

Special education. “There is some evidence and a lot of strong opinion” about the extent to which children and youth in foster care are overrepresented, misidentified, and underserved in special education. “More research should be done” to further quantify and describe their eligibility for special education, receipt of services, and developmental and educational outcomes.

As a group, the experts reasoned that children and youth in foster care are likely overrepresented in special education for a number of reasons: the assessment challenge of making a determination when information from parents and teachers is incomplete or unobtainable; the “misguided perception that special education leads to more services and that’s a good thing”; the fact that group home operators are paid higher fees when students qualify for special education services; and the “tendency for foster parents, teachers, and case workers to advocate for special education services” as a way to catch up on missed schooling or address problematic behaviors. They concluded, “If there were another way to get these children the mental health services they need, they wouldn’t be in special education.” For schools, special education “is the only game in town” since mental health services are inadequate or nonexistent.

“Foster children in special education are adrift.” They enter at higher rates than the general K-12 population and exit at lower rates, but “we don’t yet know why.” The earlier they enter foster care the greater the likelihood they are placed in special education, but “we can’t explain this.” Behavior problems associated with the foster care experience can masquerade as delays and disabilities, and assessments don’t seem to detect this. Individualized Education Plans are often dated and incomplete. “There is no direct clear evidence that special education works for them...we need to investigate and might find that $1+1 \neq 2$ for this population.” It remains an open question whether special education is an effective way to alleviate the disruptive behaviors, extreme emotions, and learning gaps typical of many children and youth in foster care.

Out-of-home placement types and school success. Little is known about whether or how a placement type (kinship care, foster family care, agency care, group home care, community treatment facility) affects school success. The preliminary evidence the experts cited indicates that placement type is not correlated with educational outcomes or, “more controversially, suggest better outcomes for kids outside family care.” This issue warrants further study, but with some cautions. A few of the experts noted that there are both “good and bad placements of all types” that could affect educational outcomes. Children and youth diagnosed with learning disabilities also are the hardest to place and least likely to receive permanency, potentially skewing results.

Similarly, little is known about whether or how permanency through adoption or reunification affects school success. “The field doesn’t know much because it’s the finish line,” explained one of the experts. Another reflected, “We have no proof that permanency and reunification lead to better outcomes, and we don’t know why.”

School mobility, school type, and school success. Research seems to confirm that “school stability helps kids” and that changes in school placements resulting from changes in home placements are “a powerful risk factor” for poor educational outcomes. Yet the evidence stops short of answering a number of questions related to school instability. The experts wanted to know: How many school changes are associated with which kinds of educational outcomes? Does remaining in an underperforming school of origin result in better outcomes than changing to a better school? Which school types do children and youth in foster care attend? Are school mobility rates higher or lower for certain kinds of students, for example, those in special education or high school?

Resilience. As a group, the experts knew of no research that examined factors that contribute to resilience and high performance in school for children and youth in foster care. “We haven’t done this research because so many of them do poorly.” It was suggested that “conducting case studies of kids who do well” would be worthwhile.

Educational advocacy. Since children and youth in foster care lack parents to advocate for their educational interests, they depend on the adults in their lives to navigate the school, child welfare, and judicial systems. “Education is the work of childhood,” explained one of the experts, “and it’s our job to advocate.” The experts were of one mind: foster parents, educators, case workers, judges and others often lack the knowledge, skills, training, and support to effectively advocate and, likewise, there is a need for more and better information to put into their practice.

Data Collection and Sharing

Improving the quality of data and the reliability of information sharing across systems is needed to strengthen educational supports and outcomes for children and youth in foster care. Misplaced, delayed, inaccessible, and incomplete records can compromise teaching and learning. Legal status, confidentiality requirements, and incompatible information-management systems add further complexity. Good data and information sharing are essential for effective school practices. Here is what the experts said about data issues.

More and better data. As a group, the experts regarded available data on the educational outcomes of children and youth in foster care as inadequate for either research or practical purposes. “We don’t know what we don’t know since disaggregated data generally don’t exist.” To answer questions about what works to improve academic performance and make significant changes to policies and practices, the experts said they need “more and better education data.”

Data sharing. The experts agreed: “We don’t need further study about data sharing, we just need to do it.” Even though the current state of sharing information across systems was described by one expert “as an absolute scrambled egg,” what they wanted was action, not information. The time is now to “implement a coherent student database that links with all the other systems” that affect the lives of children and youth in foster care.

Getting Started: Topics and Questions for a Research Agenda

Throughout these conversations, experts identified unanswered questions in general as well as several they considered particularly urgent. A set of 42 questions emerged that together form a starting point toward a research agenda that could help fill the gaps in what we know about children in foster care and the factors that shape their educational outcomes. The questions are listed below, organized into seven categories: early intervention services; preschool; special education; trauma/assessment; placement; school factors, strategies, and outcomes; and system issues.

Grappling with the Gaps: List of Research Questions

Early Intervention Services

1. What percentages of eligible young children in foster care receive early intervention services?
2. How many are assessed? How many are referred? How many receive services?
3. What are the specific barriers that prevent young children in foster care from being assessed, referred, and receiving these services (e.g., transportation, legal status, residential mobility, family chaos, complexity of assessing developmental delays, inadequately trained foster parents)?
4. What are the value, feasibility, and/or trade-offs of universally expanding eligibility and access to early intervention services for all young children in foster care?

Preschool

5. What proportion of young children in foster care attends high-quality preschool?
6. What are the specific barriers to attending preschool (e.g., poverty, residential mobility, limited slots, transportation, cost, stigma of being in foster care, challenge of meeting parent involvement requirements, lack of mandate from child welfare system)?
7. What are the numbers, locations, eligibility criteria, treatment modalities, and funding sources of therapeutic preschools?
8. What are the developmental and educational outcomes for young children in foster care who attend therapeutic preschools?
9. What are the long-term effects of high-quality preschool on the educational trajectory for children in foster care?
10. Should public policy mandate that all children ages 3-5 enroll in a high-quality preschool, and, if so, what would it take?

Special Education

11. How can the transition from early intervention services to special education in elementary school be strengthened?
12. Are children and youth in foster care overrepresented, misidentified, and underserved in special education?
13. Is special education an effective way to alleviate the disruptive behaviors, extreme emotions, and learning gaps typical of many children and youth in foster care, or are other types of services and supports needed?
14. Are there assessments capable of distinguishing between behavior problems associated with the foster care experience, versus developmental delays and disabilities?

Trauma/Assessments

15. How does trauma affect learning difficulties and problematic behaviors?
16. How many children in foster care have trauma symptoms that impede learning?
17. What can schools do to assess and monitor traumatized children?
18. How can schools intervene to address symptoms of trauma help traumatized children perform better academically?
19. What types/content of professional development for teachers can help them understand how trauma affects cognitive and socio-emotional functioning (and their relationship to learning)?
20. What are effective school-based mental health models?

Placements

21. Does residential placement type affect school success?
22. In what ways does residential mobility affect school performance?
23. What are the developmental and academic outcomes of children and youth who are placed in congregate care and/or attend residential schools? What specific attributes of these settings help or hinder youth in achieving educational outcomes?

24. What happens in the lives of students who experience disrupted schooling caused by disciplinary sanctions or dropping out (especially regarding destabilizing home placements as well as school)?
25. How does permanency (through adoption or reunification) affect school success?

School Factors, Strategies, and Outcomes

26. Is keeping children in their school of origin a good policy for attaining positive educational outcomes, and does it matter if the school of origin is a low-performing school?
27. How many school changes are associated with which kinds of educational outcomes?
28. Which school types do children and youth in foster care attend?
29. Are school mobility rates higher or lower for certain kinds of students — e.g., those in special education or high school?
30. What are the relative contributions of the following factors to the lower academic performance of children and youth in foster care:
 - student effect (i.e., cognitive functioning, socio-emotional development),
 - teacher effect (i.e., classroom instruction, professional knowledge and skill),
 - school effect (i.e., school climate, class size, low-performing schools), or
 - system effect (i.e., being in the child welfare system)?
31. What instructional strategies should classroom teachers use to improve academic outcomes for children and youth in foster care?
32. How well do children and youth in foster care perform on state assessments, and what percentage meet grade level standards in reading and mathematics?
33. What are effective academic remediation strategies?

34. Are high school students in foster care disproportionately referred out of the traditional education system to GED programs and disciplinary placements?
35. Are there promising ways to prevent suspension, expulsion, and dropping out for middle and high school youth in foster care?
36. What are the sources/antecedents of these disciplinary problems (e.g., zero tolerance school policies, lack of strong parental advocacy, years of educational neglect)?
37. What are the educational outcomes of children and youth in foster care in alternative school settings compared to traditional school settings?
38. In what ways are the educational outcomes of children and youth in foster care similar to or different from those of other vulnerable student populations, and should they be considered a distinct subgroup?
39. What can we learn from studies of children/youth in foster care who are resilient and do well? What factors contribute to resilience and high performance in school for this population?

System Issues

40. What could a child welfare system look like if it was redesigned with desired family placement, educational, and developmental goals as the starting place?
41. Who owns responsibility for the educational outcomes of children and youth in foster care?
42. How can educational advocacy be made more effective among adults involved in the lives of children and youth in foster care (i.e., foster parents, educators, case workers, judges)?

Moving Ahead

Ready to Succeed has shined a light on the unacceptably poor educational outcomes of children and youth in foster care. The initiative's current efforts move from illuminating the problem to solving it. While there is no single fix, the pursuit of new ideas was viewed by the group of experts as a way to “shake-up some real innovation” in the child welfare and education systems. They called for more and better research using a number of different approaches—including experimental, longitudinal, case, naturalistic, demonstration, and implementation studies—to encourage “out-of-the-box thinking,” “starting over with some policies and practices,” “fixing a system in crisis that has kids jumping all over the place,” and “experimenting to really change things.”

Getting to answers is urgently needed. This requires a deliberate shift in research priorities from mainly documenting the causes and consequences of gaps in student achievement to informing policies and practices with evidence and effectively intervening in ways – and at a scale—that matter to the half million children and youth growing up in foster care.

The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning

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